

American Embassy's Iftaar
September 17, 2009
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Salaam Aleikum. Good evening. It's a great pleasure to welcome you all to the American Embassy's Iftaar, and to Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield's home. The Ambassador is in the United States right now, and asked me to extend her welcome in her absence.

First, I'd like to extend special thanks to Imam Habib Sheriff, the Vice Chairman of the National Muslim Council of Liberia, who made the call to prayer this evening; and to Sheikh Kafumba Konneh, the Chairman of the National Muslim Council of Liberia, and Brother Benjamin Lartey, the Secretary General of the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia, who have joined me tonight in welcoming you all to the American Embassy's Iftaar.

Hosting Iftaars is a long tradition at Embassies in countries that have Muslim-majority populations. And it's a tradition that goes back to 1996 in the White House. That was the first year an American President hosted an Iftaar, back when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was First Lady.

That White House tradition has continued every year since then. Three American Presidents in a row have hosted Iftaars because they recognize – and want to celebrate – the fact that the nearly seven million Muslims in our country have enriched our culture, and made it stronger.

Presidents - and Embassies - also host Iftaars to demonstrate America's commitment to engaging with Muslims on the basis of mutual interest and mutual respect. Everywhere in the world, my government is committed to listening and learning, to creating bridges of understanding, and to building stronger bonds of cooperation.

As many of you know, this is not the first Iftaar this Embassy has hosted. I'm not sure when we started – perhaps someone here this evening can tell us that. However, this year is the first time we have reached out to some non-Muslim communities of Liberia for our gathering. We're especially pleased that the leaders of some of Liberia's Christian organizations and Chief Zanzan Karwor have joined us this evening to break the fast with us, and with their Muslim countrymen and women.

I would also like to mention that this year we also invited more women than we have in years past. A few weeks ago I had the great pleasure of meeting with a large group of women who represent more than a dozen Muslim women's organizations from throughout the country. They are working together now to form a federation. I'm very pleased that some of them are with us this evening.

We decided to broaden our invitation list in these ways because we believe strongly that there is more that unites people of all faiths than there is that divides us, and we want to share that spirit.

Ramadan is time of reflection, when Muslims around the world look inward and express gratitude for the blessings in their lives. It's also a time to renew family and community ties, a time to focus on the responsibility that human beings have to each other, and a time to remember the common values that bind us all together.

Among the values that we all hold in common are a commitment to justice, tolerance, and the dignity of all human beings. America will always stand for the universal rights of all people to speak their mind, practice their religion, contribute fully to society, and have confidence in the rule of law.

America will also work with Liberians from all faiths and all walks of life to advance our shared aspirations for this country: to build a society where everyone can live in peace and security; where everyone has the right to get an education and to work with dignity; and where people of all faiths have the freedom to practice their faiths, and have their faiths respected.

This will take time and patience. We cannot change things over night, not in America and not in Liberia. As President Obama said in Cairo earlier this year, this new beginning must be sustained through the effort of all of us. We must listen to each other, learn from each other, respect one another, and affirm our common values. Through that effort, we will find common ground, and we can then turn common ground into common action.

Because whatever God you pray to – or even whether you believe at all – we all need to work for the same goals: a world where our children can live together in peace and prosperity, and have every opportunity to fulfill their potentials.

And now, let's enjoy our food!